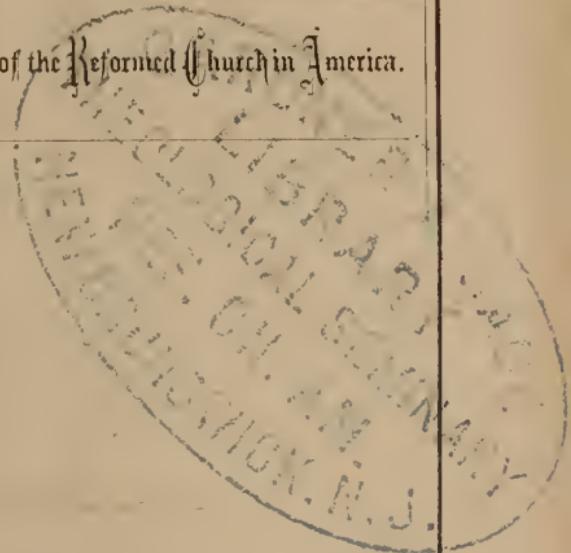


Board of Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church in America.



THE MISSIONARY CHARACTER  
AND  
OBLIGATION OF THE CHURCH.

1883.



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BY REV. JOHN K. ALLEN.

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I have been asked to speak for a limited time upon the Missionary Character and Obligations of the Church. I do not need to show you how large the theme is to which I am to direct your attention for a few minutes, and it will be plain to all that I cannot say all nor even a large part of what belongs to such a subject as this.

Let me direct your thoughts to two or three points which most naturally present themselves when we consider this theme.

And in the first place the Missionary Character and Obligation of the Church is indicated in its very charter. We must always start here. On the evening of the first Lord's Day, Jesus stood in the midst of the disciples, and having given them his salutation, said: "As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you." This was not addressed to all the apostles nor to the apostles alone. One of the eleven was absent, and others were there besides the apostles. The commission was given to the Christian society and not to any special order of men.

Later, and near the time of the ascension, He meets the disciples by appointment, from the other side the cross and the grave, upon a mountain in Galilee.

There are not only the twelve, but five hundred brethren present at once. To them He declares the extent, method and duration of His sovereignty, and gives the command which has never been recalled: "Go ye, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." It is the fulness of the times. All things are now ready, and the seed which has been ripening in the little garden spot of Israel is now to be scattered throughout the world. He claims all peoples and all time for His own. Now here are the orders which Christ has laid upon His Church. His command is to *go*—to go to all nations—and to keep on going until the end of the world. A church which is not a missionary is a disloyal church, and is false to its charter. A charter includes two things—privileges, and duties as a consequent. The privileges of the Church are the presence of Christ with His power in it. "All authority has been given Me in heaven and on earth." Its duties spring from that. "Go ye, therefore, and disciple, for I am with you all the days." If a church will not obey these commands, there will be lacking the tokens of Christ's presence with it. A church without the missionary spirit must be a declining one. Even history shows that the missionary church is the strong, living and growing one.

The early disciples did not attempt to gainsay this command of their Lord. They made no effort to show Him the dismal and hopeless outlook. Loyalty would demand that they should attempt the impossible. Loyalty demands it of us to-day. The outlook is not so entirely discouraging as it was when those few men were set down in the centre of a moral Sahara and told to make it blossom as the rose. In our day there are lines of light along the edges of the darkest continents, like that intolerable radiance which you have seen burnishing the edges of a great,

gloomy continent of cloud hanging in mid-heaven. But still to-day it is only the minority which has heard of Christ. Two out of every three of the inhabitants of the earth have never seen a Bible. But here are written in the charter of the Church the unchanging words of Jesus: "Go, and make disciples of all nations." Whether we go to succeed or fail, loyalty demands that we go. President Mark Hopkins, at the recent meeting of the American Board, spoke of the answer of some Russian soldiers when told they were marching to certain death: "That's none of our business." It is the answer of the Church when men speak of obstacles.

Opportunities and advantages for fulfilling this command are afforded us to-day such as the world has never before had. It need not be said that our boasted inventions cannot of themselves usher in the kingdom of God. The electric light cannot dissipate any moral darkness. The telegraph can in the twinkling of an eye bring to a man the news of the loss of what is dearest to him in life. But when he interrogates it for help and sympathy he finds it dumb and dead. We girdle the earth with railroads and steamship lines, but neither the fleetest ship nor the swiftest train can carry a man away from himself—from his own bad heart—nor across the border into the kingdom of God. Yet in all these things there is something of which we may take advantage. The world is made one neighborhood, and men are made a brotherhood. They make distinct the appeal of heathendom for help, because our nearness thrusts its want in our faces. They make it easier to carry to the nations the bread of life. They are the wings on which the mighty Gospel may fly abroad. Peoples to whom the apostles could only have gone with strenuous efforts, spurred on by invincible zeal, are easy of access to the Church of this century. If the

men of the past could plead some excuse for the difficulties in the way, much less have we. In no age of the Church has this command of Jesus to go and preach the Gospel to every creature been more imperative and absolute than it is at this hour.

Our time compels us to leave this ground of the Church's missionary obligations and look at another. The truth which Jesus entrusts to the messengers so sent forth deepens their responsibility. It is unlike any other which men can possibly carry. Its aim is nothing less than the complete and eternal salvation of those to whom it comes. That work it professes to be able to do.

If the Church really believes it has anything as important as that to say, its sense of obligation ought to be awful and overwhelming. It was this belief which gave stimulus and an unquenchable zeal to the early disciples. They had tarried in company with the Master and knew all His story. When the Spirit descended there were no new facts to be added to the stock they possessed. But how it all became transfigured at Pentecost. Their story had run up the scale and had become a gospel. The tale they could tell would bring salvation. The hundred striking incidents they could narrate were not merely interesting, but no man could hear them without being challenged to make an awful decision whose consequences would reach into eternity. What they had to say distanced in importance any possible message which could be entrusted to men. Up to this hour, with their story of a perfect life, they had been like men who see a star in the sky and do not know it is a world. There it is, a beautiful bright point in the heavens winking recognition down to the earth, giving glory to the night. But now a man comes with his telescope and spectroscope. And then they find that that thing whose light pierces the darkness is a

great world, vastly larger than this ball of earth on which they stand ; they find out concerning its atmosphere and composition, and never again as they look up at it can they think of it as only a needle of light piercing its way through the gloom. So marvellous a change came over the disciples when Pentecost came, and their sweet, beautiful story unfolded its real great meanings to them. It was not now a mere narrative, it was gospel. And the question was not now how to get courage enough to say it—the question was how to keep still, even though the cost of speaking might be imprisonment and death. O, it must be said—it pressed up to their lips to be said, and they cried : “ We cannot but speak of the things which we have seen and heard..” They must say it or die—must say it if they died. If the Church is possessed with this truth, that it has the Gospel, the message of salvation to carry to the world, its sense of obligation will never let it sleep. Such men will have their feet shod with the readiness of the Gospel of peace. Were not the feet of the missionary Paul shod in that way? With what restless, eager, tireless feet does he go over the world! He goes to city after city and province after province. Now he is climbing the mountain passes, and again sailing upon the deep. He presses north among the half-barbarous people of Lystra, and again encounters the philosophers on the Acropolis. He no sooner starts a church in one place than his eager, yearning heart summons him away. He visits one island, and gets wrecked upon another. He is in Antioch and Ephesus, in Philippi and Corinth, in Athens and Rome. This readiness of the Gospel is the shoes he wears. They are shoes which wax not old; the feet which wear them are restless and fleet and grow not weary, and they are beautiful upon the mountains. As the messenger of the gods was said to have winged feet, so

does this messenger of God seem to go with incredible swiftness from land to land and people to people. If you asked him the reason of it all, he would tell you he had the Gospel which would save these men; they were dying in ignorance and darkness and a heavy responsibility rested upon him of conveying the truth. He looked out at the world with covetous eyes; he wanted it for his Master—he wanted to save these souls. That same spirit burns in every true missionary heart, and every Christian heart ought to be that. This missionary fire made John Williams cry: "I cannot stay in a single island; human souls are perishing all around. I must have a ship to send a messenger to other islands to guide the heathen to heaven." This deep conviction in the heart of the Church that it has the only Gospel ever delivered to the world, that it has what the rest of the world does not have, and which it must have or die, of necessity throws upon it the heaviest obligations.

And this sense of responsibility is deepened when we remember that if we do not give the Gospel to them they never will get it. This duty and privilege has been devolved upon men—there is no missionary but man. The Lord Jesus never preached His Gospel to any man. For forty days after His resurrection He seemed to hover on the borders of two worlds, seeming to be claimed by each, now in sight and now out of it. But there is no evidence that in those days before the ascension, when perhaps He revisited unseen some of the scenes of His labors and sorrows, He preached His truth to any soul; not at the house of the widow in Nain, or the house of the woman who loved much in Magdala; not at the house of the publican in Jericho, or at the home of the demoniac in Gadara. Even after His ascension, when He is going to claim Saul of Tarsus for Himself, from out that supernal glory which smites the persecutor to

the earth on the outskirts of Damascus, the Gospel is not preached by the heavenly voice. Let him go into the city and a man shall tell him what he must do. And although His heart broods with unutterable love over the world He died to save, when has He broken the heavens and come to preach to any dying soul in any land in any time?

And this mission is given to no angel. Once they bent on quivering wing over the hills of Bethlehem and broke the midnight silence with their song, while their spokesman cried: "I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all the people." Once they cried from out the amazing emptiness of the sepulchre: "He is not here, He is risen;" but when since then has an angel preached of the advent or the resurrection of Jesus? They may brood over the beggar lying full of sores at the rich man's gate, and when the spirit has been freed from the rotting robe of the flesh, a convoy of them may bear it to Abraham's bosom; but they cannot tell him, lying there in that torturing garment of the body, the message of salvation. There is joy in their presence; the light from the face of God is reflected in their faces, when one poor, penitent soul drops its first tear, lifts it broken cry for forgiveness. But though their interest is so deep they may not carry the word of forgiveness. The Son of Man can say to His angels *go*, and to others *come*, and they will obey; but to them He has not said: "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." Men and brethren, let us be sure of this, if we do not carry the Gospel to the heathen they will never get it. We are put in trust of the Gospel. How shall they hear without a preacher? Jesus breaks the bread, and gives it to His disciples, and the disciples give it to the multitude.

Does not the sense of our obligation deepen as we think of these things? An awakened Christian con-

sciousness will be oppressed with the need of the whole world. Macaulay says concerning the keen sense of wrong which characterized Edmund Burke, that "oppression in Bengal was to him the same thing as oppression in the streets of London." It was a rare soul which could feel that wrong was as really and awfully wrong so far away as at his own doorstep. In the new life which Christianity brings to men, in the lofty outlook it gives them, it strives to make them feel that a soul is as really a soul, that it is as really worth saving, and that its sins are as awful if it live in China or India or Japan, as if it lived in Philadelphia or New York. Carey made his rude map of the world, and as he pointed his customers to one land after another and said: "That is pagan," and "That is pagan," the tears would steal down his cheeks. The heart which is alive will feel the truth of the hymn, and hear hoarse voices coming from where the winds blow over the icy mountains of Greenland, and weak voices coming from the enervating atmosphere of India, and its dreams by night will be haunted by visions of men who cry: "Come over and help us."

There are other things which I might say if time allowed, as, for instance, that we owe everything to missionary enterprise. We are sinners of the Gentiles. Our ancestors, but a few centuries ago, were sunken in all the degradation we now find in the heathen world. The ancient Britons were wild men who wore the skins of wild beasts. The ancient Scots were cannibals. The ancient Saxons delighted in human sacrifices, and the Gauls used the skulls of their enemies as drinking cups in their feasts. That is the hole of the pit whence we were digged. What we are we owe to missionary enterprise. Is there not a new obligation in this fact? Shall we keep what we have and share it with none?

"Shall we whose souls are lighted  
With wisdom from on high,  
Shall we to men be bright,  
The lamp of life deny?"

How wonderful was the vision which swept before the mind of Jesus, as on that mountain He gave command to disciple all the nations. Never did the grandest dream of any conqueror picture anything so tremendous and sublime. Once more now at the end, as at the beginning, He saw all the kingdoms of the earth and the glory of them, and again a voice, not this time a false one, said: "All these will I give thee." He would give him the heathen for his inheritance, and the uttermost part of the earth for his possession. Jesus is sending His followers out to make a universal conquest which shall never be reversed. How weak He seems, this man so recently crucified as a malefactor, with scars still upon Him! And what a picture of helplessless that little crowd of poor, ignorant, unarmed disciples is! This, the power which is to revolutionize the world! We can as easily imagine those men turning their face to the North, and with their united breath blowing back the bitter winds which sweep down upon them from over the snows of Lebanon. We could as easily imagine that the spring breaking out from the rock at the feet of Jesus should be copious enough to assuage the thirst of the world. As we picture the scene there is no stopping place in our judgment between the widest extremes—this is the wildest lunacy or absolute divinity. Jesus stands upon this mountain in Galilee in apparent helplessness, and sends out His undisciplined followers to take captive the world. And the magnificence of the conception is being equalled by the grandeur of the fulfillment. Having been lifted up, He is drawing all men to Him, and in Richter's words He is the one who "being the holiest among the mighty, the mightiest among the holy,

lifted with His pierced hand empires off their hinges, and turned the stream of centuries out of its channel, and still governs the ages." With the success of centuries behind us, we hear His word anew to-day to go and disciple the nations. Every time we pray the prayer He taught us and say "thy kingdom come; thy will be done in earth as in heaven," we hold up before us the idea of a glorious consummation, and the truth of our own obligation. He has fulfilled His word and shall fulfill it—"Lo! I am with you all the days, even unto the end of the world." Soon, when our part of discipling the nations is done, we may hope to stand with a multitude of those redeemed from every land and hear great voices in heaven, which shall say, "The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever."







